

Discourse Analysis: An Overview for the Neophyte Researcher

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Abstract

The key aim of this paper is to introduce to the novice researcher the various ways in which discourse analysis, as a methodology, may be applied to health and social care improvement research, to show how usual taken-for-granted assumptions and views of the world may be challenged in the quest for deeper and more critical meaning. The paper will explain what is meant by discourse analysis as a research methodology and how some researchers choose to use discourse analysis in their work. Definitions of discourse and discourse analysis will then be addressed together with an explication of the different traditions of discourse analysis. In turn, difficulties surrounding the development of specific guidelines for techniques of 'doing' a discourse analysis will be presented, before finally moving on to outline the advantages and limitations of discourse research and the latest debates in the field

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Discourse analysis is generally an umbrella term for the many traditions by which discourse may be analysed. It is a critique of cognitivism that developed from the 1970s onwards, although it has its roots in the 'turn to language' in the 1950s (Woolgar, 1988). Whereas cognitivism speaks of objective, observable, knowable reality, on the other hand discourse analysis speaks of multiple versions of reality, multiple 'truths', which are constructed through texts, therefore there are correspondingly multiple versions of analyses. Here, language is viewed as a social performance or a social action - it is productive and constitutive (language both creates social phenomena and is representative of social phenomena). The method explores power relations from a critical standpoint in an attempt to make sense of the social world by providing new critical insights – a positive contribution to both theory and

research. Not only this, but discourse analysis provides a whole new vocabulary. Discourse analysis is more than just a methodology – it is a philosophy, a way of being. It may be situated at any point along a continuum of epistemological positions, from realist to relativist. There are many competing traditions (and combinations of traditions) within discourse analysis that may be utilised according to both the epistemological positioning of the researcher and also according to what research questions are being asked. Six traditions of discourse analysis have been identified in the literature: conversation analysis; interactional sociolinguistics; discursive psychology; critical discourse analysis; Bakhtinian research; and Foucauldian research (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). Before moving on to outline each model of

discourse analysis, it is important to understand what is meant by discourse and discourse analysis.

Definitions of discourse and discourse analysis can be diverse depending on the epistemological stance of the theorist. Once a clear understanding of these definitions becomes clear, the various models of discourse analysis along with their respective concepts can take on more meaning to researchers. As an example, conversation analysis and Foucauldian research can be seen as two opposing epistemological poles, therefore definitions will be dissimilar. For example, the unique perspectives of both models can be explained thus:

Conversation analysis (realist epistemology) – in this tradition, 'discourse' is defined as a communal exchange, a social and cultural resource people may draw upon to explain their activities, a linguistic system with rules. In other words, discourse is 'language' *per se*, as we know it. 'Discourse analysis' is therefore an analysis of the performative and functional aspects of speech (what it is doing and why); a focus on the construction of events through language.

Foucauldian research (relativist epistemology) – in this tradition, 'discourse' is defined as a group of statements, objects or events that represent knowledge about, or construct, a particular topic. It is a broad understanding of a discipline. Therefore, 'discourse analysis' is an analysis of the ways in which a topic has been constructed within a society; an historical analysis of the development of a specific form of knowledge (Foucault used archaeology and genealogy as his methods of discourse analysis).

From this, it can be seen that conversation analysis takes language as a simplistic system of communication that is representative of life 'as it is'. Language is all the data that matters. However, Foucault would argue that language constructs and maintains the social world in a broader sense. Language cannot be separated from the social world and context. The next section of this paper sketches out the six models of discourse analysis with a view to showing how they differ.

The six traditions of discourse analysis

Conversation analysis is primarily an objectivist, realist position, in which inductive, data driven activity is achieved whose goal is to find patterns within language (the text) and solely but absolutely describe what is there. In this case, the methods used are value-neutral. Within this inductive process, patterns in language are discovered, not interpreted or constructed. Moreover, participants themselves can be seen to orient to these normative and expected patterns. There are also assumptions that social interaction is orderly, and that such order may be found within naturally occurring materials of interaction (talk). Concepts of conversation analysis include ordinary or institutional talk, turn-taking, sequential positioning, overlaps, interruptions, and proximal and distal contexts. During the process of analysis, data are viewed as a joint interpretation of participants' own reality. Examples of conversation analysis in health and social care related research can be found in phone calls to a psychiatric hospital (Sacks, 1992), analysis of delicate topics in counselling (Silverman, 1997), goal setting in physiotherapy, (Schoeb, 2009), and membership categorisation in men's talk about violence towards women (Stokoe, 2010).

Interactional sociolinguistics is an analysis of power within linguistic practices, a search for patterns within language as a system. Although similar to conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics posits that members' interpretations of language form methods of dominance, not the words themselves, and the focus on power is thus more elevated than in conversation analysis. Examples of sociolinguistics include interethnic communications (Gumpertz, 1982), and culture, gender and power (Tannen, 1993).

Discursive psychology is heavily influenced by conversation analysis, but also incorporates Bakhtinian and Foucauldian principles, therefore presenting as a hybrid of discourse analysis traditions. Within this approach, the turn to discourse and language in psychology has involved a shift to studying talk in itself. It challenges psychological phenomena (identity, memory, personality, attitudes), asserting instead that these are not entities in themselves, rather they are constituted through language. Concepts within discursive psychology include interpretive

repertoires, ideological dilemmas, and subject positions. Examples of this approach to analysis within the field of health may be seen in the construction of myalgic encephalomyelitis (M.E.) by Horton-Salway (2001), and crying on a child protection helpline (Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

Critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field that includes linguistics, semiotics and discourse analysis (the field of discourse studies), and is concerned with theorising and researching social processes and social change. Being deeply political in its analysis of societal policies and practices, critical discourse analysis shows how 'elites' play a prominent role in reproducing dominant discourses. This discourse tradition illustrates a desire for positive political change. From this perspective, real understanding of what goes on in any particular interactional episode is contingent upon knowing its place in the relevant macro societal context. Examples of critical discourse analysis include the subject of racism (van Dijk, 1993), and welfare reform (Fairclough, 2001). Since the needs of health and social care organisations are highly complex and challenging within a national government led reforming agenda, critical discourse analysis would therefore provide a political critique of systems and practices which govern the improvement of health services. For example, a comparison of national pandemic influenza preparedness plans and WHO guidance documents (Garoon and Duggan, (2005).

Within Bakhtinian research, language is considered to be alive and fluid, a struggle between centripetal (authoritative, fixed, inflexible discourse) and centrifugal (genres, professions, historical specificity, cohorts) forces. Everyday speech is patterned into speech genres - themes, constructions, styles. This model incorporates very specific concepts, and social conflict and ideology can be evidenced in evaluative accents, or judgements, which are conveyed by words. The concept of heteroglossia identifies a dynamic multiplicity of voices, genres and social languages that colour interactions within a social world. Bakhtin asserts that reported speech is either linear (reported verbatim) or pictorial (the reported voice is infiltrated with the voice of the reporter). Dialogicality is a concept which explains that there is always one other voice implicit in any utterance, whilst chronotopity infers the spatio-temporal

nature of language. Examples of Bakhtinian research include an analysis of mother and child identity and socialisation (Wertsch, 1990), and the concepts of dialogue and carnival applied to social work practice (Irving and Young, 2002). Furthermore, Maybin (2001) provides an interesting and thorough understanding of the theoretical background underpinning Mikhail Bakhtin's work.

Finally, for Michel Foucault, discourse is a system of representations involving the production of power/knowledge through language. The concept of discursive formation assumes that any discursive event, action or text that refers to the same phenomenon, shares the same style and supports the same strategy. Further, an episteme is a higher level, more dominant discourse characteristic of the state of knowledge at any one time (for example, religion, science). Foucault asserted that nothing exists outside of discourse - that is, things do exist, but only take on meaning through discourse. Power, once more, is intrinsic to a Foucauldian discourse analysis as it is seen to operate through the technologies of institutional apparatus; Foucault distinguished between sovereign power and disciplinary power. Proponents of this particular perspective consider there is no absolute truth, rather multiple versions of events, a social constructionist theory of representation and meaning. Individuals are subjected to and a subject of discourse - that is, discourse has the ability to construct subject positions which are then available to take up, contest or reject. Typical Foucauldian techniques include genealogy and archaeology as discourse was explicitly historicised by Foucault. Data is believed to be anything that may be read for meaning; language, text, pictures, events and objects. There are no boundaries between data and context. Examples of Foucauldian research can be found in Mehan's (1996) construction of a learning disabled student and Miller and Rose's (1988) analysis of the Tavistock Clinic. It has also been shown how power within the special education system affects the discourse of 'choice' for parents (Morgan, 2005). More recently, Foucault's methods have been applied to the challenges faced by occupational therapists (MacKey (2007) and government documents on depression and mental health in British Columbia (2009).

The focus on power makes discourse analysis useful for a critical analysis and evaluation of many aspects of health, wellbeing and social care. For example,

leadership, capacity building and capability of the workforce, service improvement, innovative strategies and interventions are all sites in which analyses of power can be used to great effect. In recent years, discourse analytical work has been completed in many health-related areas, for example, medical discourse (Gotti and Salager-Meyer, 2006) doctor-patient communication about diabetes management (Hodges, Kuper and Reeves, 2008) and body politics and physiotherapy (Nicholls, 2008), to name but a few.

Advantages and limitations of discourse analysis

Now the six traditions of discourse analysis have been identified, there is a need to understand the advantages and limitations of these traditions. All have their critics, but the advantages appear to far outweigh the limitations. For example, discourse analysis may be used for a variety of reasons. The techniques can reveal often unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of human behaviour, making salient either hidden or dominant discourses that maintain marginalised positions in society. They can reveal or help to construct a variety of new and alternative social subject positions that are available, which in itself can be very empowering to the most vulnerable individuals. For example, promoting health, reducing health inequalities, improving services for vulnerable people, increasing the availability and quality of drug treatment programmes, and improving the mental health of the population are all ways in which discourse analysis may empower patients. Moreover, discourse analysis can provide a positive social psychological critique of any phenomenon under the gaze of the researcher. Advantages are normally specific to each tradition, but generally discourse analysis has a relevance and practical application at any given time, in any given place, and for any given people: discourse analysis is context specific. In terms of application, conversation analysis involves a re-design of the topic through the study of interactional order; others along the continuum of epistemological positions redirect attention to the discursive construction of various social phenomena; yet others on the opposite end of the continuum link this discursive construction into the operation of wider social processes that are seen as oppressive. Understanding the function of language and discourse enables positive individual and social change, therefore

discourse analysis presents a critical challenge to traditional theory, policy and practice in many contexts. A reflexive stance is incorporated wherein researchers cannot be neutral observers.

One limitation of discourse analysis is that the array of options available through the various traditions can render issues of methodology problematic, as each tradition has its own epistemological position, concepts, procedures, and a particular understanding of discourse and discourse analysis. Once more, the disadvantages to discourse analysis are specific to each tradition, but generally, proponents of discourse analysis believe that meaning is never fixed and so everything is always open to interpretation and negotiation. This concept can be very challenging as the door is never closed on any analysis and each new interpretation gives rise to a further intense critique. In addition, similarities and differences between concepts may cause confusion for new researcher as well as the more experienced, and when the confusion dissipates, there needs to be an explanation of concepts and justification for their use in each and every analysis. Importantly, discourse analysis may disrupt longstanding notions of selfhood, gender, autonomy, identity, choice, and such disruption can be very disturbing. Each tradition has been critiqued, for example, conversation analysis is said to be too narrow, Foucauldian discourse analysis too broad! The general lack of explicit techniques for researchers to follow has often been cited as a hindrance but notwithstanding, a good grasp of basic concepts can be applied to any chosen area.

‘So...how do I ‘do’ a Foucauldian discourse analysis?’

As with all critical theories, discourse analysis is not a hard science, since it is a deconstructive reading and critical interpretation or construction, and there are no strict guidelines for analysts to follow (Burr, 1995). Discourse researchers advocate different methods for analysing discourse from a Foucauldian perspective, subsequently creating problems for novice analysts in terms of there being no one definitive method. For example, Parker (1992) identifies twenty steps in the Foucauldian analysis of discourse, providing a thorough guide through initial identification of texts to the political and social implications of discourse from how power relations

are reproduced in texts. These comprehensive steps focus also on the historical origins of discourses and their relationships with institutional power and ideology. Parker, however, denies these steps constitute a method, *per se*, and argues for resisting any such method.

Kendall and Wickham (1999), although delineating fewer steps in the process, provide guides to archaeological and genealogical analyses. Willig (1999) offers six steps in the Foucauldian analysis of discourse demonstrating how the construction of objects and subjects within discourse are explicated in texts and addressing implications of this for subjectivity and practice. However, this method relates to the direct analysis of a piece of text, and ignores the more fundamental precepts of Foucauldian method, those of power/knowledge, historicity and governmentality, ignoring also the broader 'tissues of meaning' that make up a particular discourse. Likewise, Hall (2001) covers the basic concepts of Foucauldian analysis in easy steps, but does not include the issue of power that is at stake. Carabine (2001) also presents a guide to genealogical analysis conducted in a Foucauldian vein, giving broad and basic instructions. However, there is no evidence of specific Foucauldian concepts - power/knowledge, historicity and subjectivity are absent.

However, notwithstanding these methods, or ways to approach a discourse analysis, it has been argued that analysts may adopt their own methodological procedures, those which are guided by the specific topic, research question and point of focus, providing the researcher explains their detailed and thorough procedure with justification for their choices (Taylor, 2001).

Debates in discourse research

Debates in discourse research rumble on as proponents of one tradition continue to challenge the viewpoints and claims of another. There are many key debates that either unite or divide theorists and researchers due to the diverse nature of disciplines, domains, forms of data and discourse traditions. The disciplines within which discourse analysis is practiced can include psychology, sociology,

cultural studies, social policy, anthropology, education, linguistics, politics, international relations. The domains include social interaction, mind, selves and sense-making, culture and social relations. Types of data considered appropriate to capture include those gained through interviews, focus groups, documents and records, media representations, naturally occurring conversation and political speeches. Finally, the discourse traditions, as already outlined, include conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, discursive psychology, critical discourse analysis, Bakhtinian research and Foucauldian research. Questions within these debates include, for example, the following: are these techniques of analysis a process of interpretation or discovery?; what counts as relevant data?; what counts as relevant context?; should the analyst be politically engaged?; does the analysis aim for social critique or mere description?; and how are analyses applied in social and political settings? These are questions that cannot easily be answered, and further theoretical debate must surely be encouraged with each and every discourse analysis. Critical debate will always be welcomed within discourse research.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper has not only introduced to the novice researcher discourse analysis as a methodology and how the methods may be applied to research that seeks to improve health and social care services, but also that it has inspired further critical thinking about the ways in which the social world may be viewed. It is also hoped that an explication of discourse, discourse analysis and the different traditions of discourse analysis are now understood sufficiently for new researchers to consider adopting a more critical stance when choosing appropriate research methodologies.

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